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ABSTRACT

This paper presents suggestions for writing and publishing articles in second language teaching journals, focusing on three areas: getting started (appreciating the benefits of writing for publication, starting with good ideas, efficiency, considering options beyond the typical article, choosing a good topic, replicating research, cooperating with other professionals); putting the ideas in writing (connecting ideas, reader-friendliness, use of data, use of visuals); and collaborating with editors (choosing the right publication, following the directions given in the guide for contributors, including a cover letter, having patience, accepting that not everyone will agree, treating editors as colleagues). The suggestions are specific, and are presented in outline form. A brief article on attention to detail is appended. (Contains 10 references.) (MSE)

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SUGGESTIONS ON WRITING FOR PUBLICATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING JOURNALS

Workshop presented to lecturers at
University Technology Malaysia
in Johor, Malaysia, 28 September 1996

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This talk on suggestions for publishing in language learning journals is divided into three parts. The first part presents seven suggestions for how we can get started finding ideas for what to write and how to work to improve on these ideas. The second part presents four suggestions for how to write up our ideas. The third and final part discusses six suggestions for how to choose a journal and how to collaborate successfully with journal editors. Suggestions from the various parts sometimes overlap.

I have found writing for language learning journals to be an enriching and fulfilling, although at times humbling and frustrating, experience. Hopefully, this workshop will encourage you to try your hand at it. Perhaps we can collaborate on something.

Getting Started

(1) Appreciate the Benefits of Writing for Publication

* Modelling for students that we're writers too
* Empathizing with students' problems when writing
* Becoming a better writer
* Increasing our professional self-esteem
* Learning more about our field
* Becoming a better educationist by thinking more about what we do and pressuring ourselves to practice what we preach
* Helping other educationists
* Providing a new perspective
* Building professional contacts
* Raising the status of the field

(2) Start with Good Ideas

* Research
* Methods/Techniques
* Opinions/Reactions
* Applying ideas from other fields
* Showing concrete applications of theory

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(3) Be Efficient

* Conference and workshop presentations can become publications
* Materials we prepare for courses can become publications
* Work done by students can form the basis for publications, but we need to be ethical about who gets credit for the work

(4) Consider Options Besides the Typical Article

* Reviews of books, CD-ROMs, websites, and other materials
* Opinion pieces
* Responses to previous publications
* Letters to the editor
* Teaching tips and lesson plans

(5) Choose a Good Topic

* Important to us
* Current - others are writing about it
* Our ideas do not have to be so very new, because there are scores of journals, and nobody reads them all; besides good ideas are worth repeating in new contexts

(6) Replicate

* Research can loosely or closely follow the design used by others, even if the topic is different
* A text similar to the one we plan to write can provide a good model, e.g., for organization, word choice, presentation of statistics (See Appendix 1)

(7) Cooperate with Others

* Much professional writing has more than one author
* Colleagues can provide feedback on first content and then form, and we can do the same for their writing - it's just like process approach to writing
* Faculty in other departments can help too, e.g.:
  - lecturers in statistics can help
  - those with a sociology background can provide their perspective
* Networks can be formed with people met at conferences or who have written on similar topics - some may not respond, but now more than ever with the ease of email, worldwide cooperation happens, especially when we show we've helped ourselves before asking others

* With today's trends toward learner-centred teaching, metacognition, learner strategies, and qualitative research, students can be our collaborators
    - pre-service and inservice teachers if we teach teachers
    - language students
* Who will be listed as authors of the publication and in what order the names will be listed should be discussed at the beginning of the collaboration
    - Only people who make a significant professional (rather than e.g., clerical) contribution should be authors
    - Normally the person who makes the most important contribution is first author
    - People who helped but are not authors should be included in a very brief acknowledgements section

Writing Up Our Ideas

(8) Connect Ideas

* To other people's writing
* To established theory/methodology
* To real-life examples

(9) Be Reader Friendly

* Background and explanation for those not from our country/institution
* Background and explanation for those not involved in the same specialty, e.g., we shouldn't have to be testing experts to understand the general ideas in an article on testing
* Introductions, to the article as a whole and to each section, help our readers understand our ideas
* A smooth flow from one section to another and from one paragraph to another all helps form a connected text

(10) Don't Just Present Data and Experience: Ize Them

* Analyze, synthesize, generalize, organize, conceptualize, concretize
* The various parts of our piece should be woven together, e.g., theory and research from the early parts of an article should be revisited later
* Other points of view should be recognized

(11) Use Visuals

* Visuals include tables, graphs, drawings, diagrams, photos, samples of students' writing in their original handwriting, boxes, and textual enhancement, e.g., bold, italics, and underline.
* Visuals are nice to look at and make ideas easier to understand
* Editors usually need camera ready copies of all visuals

Collaborating With Editors

(12) Choose the Right Publication

* Areas of education all have their own publications, e.g., psychology, Malay language, pragmatics, distance education, first language, writing instruction
* Some publications focus on specific places e.g., a country, region, while others are international in scope
* Publications vary in terms of their orientation, e.g., theoretical---practical (the three hyphens indicate a continuum); formal research---"unscientific" ideas & experience; quantitative---qualitative research
* A journal that appears in the reference list of our piece could be a good choice
* Status, if that is important, as different journals have different amounts of prestige in different circles
* Size of circulation, if that is important
* We can start with a high status or wide circulation journal and then go with one lower on our list if we are rejected by our first choice
* Acceptance rate, although this is not constant and may be difficult to find out, as some journals accept most of their submissions, whereas other accept only about 10%
* Our choice on many of the above options will depend on our career goals
* One study can lead to more than one publication, e.g., the research can be reported in one article and practical side of the topic can be described in another article for a different journal

(13) Follow the Directions Given in the Guide to Contributors

* Most publications provide guidelines to potential authors on such matters as:
  - Number of words
  - Number of copies
  - Format, e.g., references, line spacing, margins
  - Enclosures, e.g., diskette, biodata, photo

(14) Include a Cover Letter

* Contact information - mail, phone, fax, email, carrier pigeon(?)
* Request for acknowledgement of receipt of the manuscript (ms)
* Statement that ms has not been published elsewhere and is not being considered for publication elsewhere

(15) Be Patient

* Some journals can take a year to send a decision
* Rewriting is often necessary and beneficial
* Once a piece is accepted, it can take a year or more before it is published
* We need to make sure we have kept copies of the manuscript in case it is lost

(16) Give Up Trying to Get Everyone to Agree

* We may have to compromise to satisfy editors' requirements for revision
* If two reviewers for the same journal read the same article, one may recommend acceptance and the other rejection
* Rejection should make us think but not discourage us
* We can learn a great deal from rejection if reasons for the rejection are given
* Some journals have very high rejection rates, e.g., more than nine out of ten
* Not all journals return rejected manuscripts

(17) Treat Editors Like Colleagues

* We sink or swim together with editors - if our piece is good, everyone associated with it looks good, but if isn't very good, everyone looks bad
* Editors do not enjoy rejecting articles because it means they have less good materials for their journal
* If our preparation is thorough and on schedule, everyone is happier
* Every extra draft we have to do is more work for those who have to give us feedback
* Editors are busy too. Just as we hope they forgive our inadequacies, we should forgive theirs
* Regular correspondence keeps the communication lines open, e.g., we should let them know about new addresses and check to be sure correspondence has arrived.
* We need to carefully consider editors' guidance, and if we decide to go against it, we should communicate our reasons

RELATED READINGS

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NOTICING

What I want to talk about in this journal is something we can do to help our writing. This is something we do all the time in other circumstances. I am talking about noticing. For instance, every time we go some place new, we do a lot of noticing. In other words, we pay attention to important features of a new place.

Here's an example, earlier this year Mr Rajan and I attended a language educators' conference in Los Angeles. Surprisingly, although I am from the U.S. and Mr Rajan is from far away in India, he knows more people in the Los Angeles area than I do. One evening a former student of his in India came to our hotel to take Mr Rajan to dinner at his house, and Mr Rajan was kind enough to invite me to come along.

I have never been to India and have seldom been in Indian people's homes, so I was not sure how to behave. Thus, I was very careful to notice and copy what other people did. When Mr Rajan took off his shoes, I took off mine. The family had prepared an excellent home-cooked meal of Indian food - one of my favorites. When we sat down to eat, I saw everyone eating with their hands. I have done that before but very seldom. So, I carefully noticed how Mr Rajan put a small amount of food on his finger tips and used his thumb to push it into his mouth. I also noticed that everyone used only one hand and always the same hand - I forget which one - to eat with. Then, as best I could, I copied their way of eating the delicious food.

I do the same kind of noticing and copying when I write. For instance, as chair of RELC's research committee, I have to write several reports every year. When I first became chair, I asked Mr Khng, the RELC Registrar, for copies of the various reports prepared by the previous chair. I carefully noticed many features of these reports involving content, e.g., what type of research was reported and what aspects of the studies were described, and form, e.g., what kind of headings and punctuation were used. When I wrote my reports, I copied the features which I had noticed. Of course, I could not copy exactly because some things had changed. Please notice that: we cannot always copy exactly.

Here is another example of the power of noticing. The other day, I was reading on the Internet about one of my favorite singers, Bruce Springsteen from the U.S. I read that when he was a young teenager he loved rock music so much that every week he would write out the 20 most popular songs. I am sure that doing that helped him to learn how to be a great writer of rock music when he got older, because it helped him notice the key features of high quality rock songs.

When we read, we cannot notice everything. I only notice what is important to me at a particular time. Please try to start noticing when you read. Choose what language features you will try to notice, e.g., commas, introductions. Or, as you read, you may see something that stands out that you want to notice. What is vital is that you read a lot and that you become an aware reader. Let me say that again: What is vital is that you read a lot and that you become an aware reader.